

CTSJ

CRITICAL THEORY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE
JOURNAL OF UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH
OCCIDENTAL COLLEGE

FALL 2015

VOL. 5



THE DECONSTRUCTION OF SIMPLIFIED SOVEREIGNTY IN THE SONNETS OF SHERMAN ALEXIE'S *WHAT I'VE STOLEN, WHAT I'VE EARNED*

Joseph Ferber

University of Dayton

ABSTRACT

By looking at Sherman Alexie's manipulation of the Petrarchan sonnet form in his most recent collection, What I've Stolen, What I've Earned, this article deconstructs simplistic understanding of sovereignty as it relates to Indian identity to more accurately reflect the complex relationship between contemporary Indian culture and American capitalism. In What I've Stolen, What I've Earned, Alexie infuses the western sonnet form with Indian narrative perspectives to explore ways that economic sovereignty stands in for cultural sovereignty, ultimately fostering complacency with institutional exploitation. By approaching these sonnets with a critical lens developed from elements of Homi Bhabha's understanding of mimicry and José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification, this paper engages how Alexie pushes for a more rigorous understanding of American multiculturalism. Alexie pushes readers to more actively reflect on how conceptualizing Indians and whites as ideologically bifurcated limits Indian agency in their own self-determination. By demonstrating cultural interrelationships, both through manipulation of the sonnet form and through subject matter, Alexie sheds light on how institutionalized understandings of Indian identity perpetuate the suppression of Native culture.

Keywords: Alexie, Bhabha, Indian, Muñoz, Petrarch, sonnet

"Our sovereignty is alleged sovereignty"

– Sherman Alexie (July 2010)¹

"Maybe Native American geeks will hack-blackmail Hollywood into portraying us as complex residents of the 21st Century"

– Sherman Alexie (Twitter, December 2014)²

*"we are not mere victims but active agents in history, innovators of new ways, of Indian ways, of thinking and being and speaking and authoring in this world created by colonial contact."*³

---Craig Womack

Sherman Alexie uses poetry as a platform for exploring the complexity of contemporary Indian identity.⁴ He both negotiates the relationship between Indians and whites and explores how contemporary Indian culture continues to be marked by American colonial practices. Alexie channels his own multicultural background to depict ways that Indians have historically internalized notions of sovereignty. His experiences of reservation life and white culture contributes to an awareness of how contemporary Indian identity carries elements of both. Navigating both spaces enables the poet to deconstruct oversimplified notions of Indian sovereignty through transformative poetic moves that infuse the western sonnet form with indigenous narrative perspectives.

Disrupting the Western Sonnet Form

Alexie's transformation away from the traditional Petrarchan sonnet structure reflects ways that contemporary Indian identity is influenced by the overarching American capitalist system. His choice to maneuver within the western form as a means to disrupt its colonial context, resembles certain elements of what critical theorist Homi Bhabha calls the process of "mimicry." In discussing how mimicry functions between the colonized and colonizer, Bhabha states that "the *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of

1 Joshua B. Nelson, "'Humor is my Green Card': A Conversation with Sherman Alexie" (World Literature Today, 84.4, March 2010), 39-43.

2 Sherman Alexie, 18 December 2014, Tweet.

3 Craig Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 6.

4 I use "Indian" rather than "Native American" following Alexie's own distinctions between the terms. For example, in a 1996 interview published in the *LA Times*, Erik Himmelsbach writes, "Hollywood types also would be wise to avoid calling Alexie a 'Native American.' [Alexie] dismisses the term as meaningless, a product of white liberal guilt. 'I'm an Indian,' [Alexie] says. 'I'll only use 'Native American' in mixed company.'"

colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (126). This "double vision" occurs as colonized people imitate the actions of colonizers during the process of assimilation, yet can never literally become the colonizer themselves; because colonized people learn the "colonial discourse" from their own subjugated perspective, their knowledge of the discourse disrupts its ideological stability as it becomes learned and reproduced in a new, changed way.

Alexie's strategies do not fully adhere to Bhabha's notion of mimicry. Bhabha theorizes about India's colonial relation to Britain while Alexie is concerned with disrupting and reforming the American ideological whole. Also, Bhabha's notion of mimicry occurs by nature of the process of colonialism, while Alexie's manipulations of the sonnet form *intentionally* challenge normalized conceptions of identity to create practical space for Indian self-determination. While Bhabha's notion of mimicry doesn't fully identify the degree of intent behind Alexie's sonnets, it is a useful concept to engage Alexie's poetic strategies that challenge how common conceptions of "sovereignty" rationalize Indians' involvement in capitalism. Specifically, Alexie juxtaposes two modes of sovereignty, cultural and economic, to demonstrate how conflation of the two perpetuates exploitation on Indian reservations.

He formats entire sonnets into prose paragraphs, numbers individual sections to resemble sonnet-esque line counts, and inserts full prose paragraphs at the volte, where traditional sonnets would transition from the initial conflict of the opening octave, to the resolving sestet; with these techniques, he demonstrates how the cultural practice of demarcating something as "traditional" can simultaneously hide internalized dominant capitalistic beliefs. As a result, these sonnets employ formal and ideological cultural blending between whites and Indians to deconstruct the oversimplified understandings of sovereignty, demonstrating how acceptance of syncretism fosters transformative possibilities in regards to Indian self-determination.

Alexie has experimented with the sonnet throughout his career. In this paper, I focus on two sonnet variations from his most recent collection, *What I've Stolen, What I've Earned*.⁵ The first, demonstrated in both "Sonnet, with Slot Machines," and "Sonnet, with Vengeance," is formatted as a single paragraph with fourteen numbered sentences to maintain recognition as a sonnet. The other, demonstrated in "Monosonnet for Colonialism, Interrupted," consists of an initial octave, then an interjecting prose paragraph, concluding with a resolving sestet. In these two variations, Alexie manipulates the formal structure to navigate the intercultural experience of a modern-day Indian still entrenched in white institutions, to examine the postcolonial paradox of being acknowledged as sovereign yet simultaneously subjugated.

The poet combines the conventional two stanzas of the Petrarchan sonnet into one, deconstructing the binary that separates the first octave, which traditionally poses the conflict, from the concluding sestet, which traditionally acts as the resolution. Obscuring the separation between conflict and resolution reflects the blended narrative perspective Alexie employs to complicate the colonial whole. The formal blending of the traditional break between the sestet and octave reflect how Alexie examines the ideological overlap between both Indians and whites rather than focusing on the two racial groups as distinct ethnic and ideological entities.

5 Sherman Alexie, *What I've Stolen, What I've Earned* (Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 2014).

American poet Carrie Etter invokes Alexie's shift away from tribalism as effective in challenging solidified systems of belief:

Through his sonnets, Alexie "countersocializes" his reader to accept the irresolution inherent in American Indian experience, revising the Western belief that action solves. What imagination and irresolution together create is the potential for agency – not as a move toward a definitive solution but, through the imagined dialogic, a place where the hierarchical dialectic cannot impose its historically bound limitations, and thus, a place that enables agency for the native speaker.⁶

Through such "countersocialization," Alexie explicitly challenges the imposition of social beliefs on how people understand Indian identity. "Hierarchical" is a quality of ranking based on superiority; by using the notion of superiority as a frame for addressing normative ways that the "Indian experience" is understood, Alexie denotes whiteness as the dominant ideology that controls portrayal of Indian identity. The term "dialectic" invokes the process of reaching synthesis from two distinct entities; here, Etter suggests that shifting away from dichotomizing whites and Indians creates better understanding of how whiteness permeates all those living in the contemporary western world. Engaging the commonality of whiteness as an ideology fosters awareness one needs to challenge the institutions that such maintain racial hierarchy.

Alexie's cross-cultural poetry complicates general conceptions of Native poetry as a genre isolated from its assimilation into whiteness. The rhetoric of authenticity often upholds the correlation between racial and ideological distinction, failing to account for ways ideology can similarly permeate across cultures. Referring to a sonnet sequence in Alexie's 1996 collection, *A Summer of Black Widows*,⁷ Nancy J. Peterson challenges a critic who suggests that Indian poetry writ large downplays cross-cultural relationships as being part of Indian identity: "Alexie's sonnet-sequence, in contrast, challenges this formulation by embracing cross-cultural fusions – perhaps to such a degree that some readers may question its authenticity as a Native poem."⁸ Peterson suggests that by "embracing cross-cultural fusions," Alexie's sonnets critique notions of authenticity that fail to acknowledge the relationship between Indian and white culture. Alexie accepts this cultural overlap to debunk oversimplified cultural binaries and portray realistic, complicated representations of modern-day Indian identity.

Indian "Tradition" and the Conflation of Sovereignty

Alexie has publicly expressed his views on sovereignty. For example, his reference in the first epigraph to Indian sovereignty being "alleged" or merely speculative, comes after a longer comment during a 2010 interview in *World Literature Today* attesting to the danger of conflating cultural sovereignty with economic sovereignty:

6 Carrie Etter, "Dialectic to Dialogic: Negotiating Bicultural Heritage in Sherman Alexie's Sonnets," (Hackensack: Salem Press, 2012), 168.

7 Sherman Alexie, *A Summer of Black Widows*, (Brooklyn, Hanging Loose Press, 1996), Print.

8 Nancy J. Peterson, "The Poetics of Tribalism in Sherman Alexie's *The Summer of Black Widows*" (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2010), 141.

SA: But it's never about culture. It's always economic sovereignty. Native American sovereignty is expressed in terms of casinos, cigarettes, fireworks. It's engaged in exploitation, almost always engaged in the worst parts of capitalism. You know, the exploitation of human weakness. That's how our sovereignty gets most expressed.⁹

Alexie draws attention to ways in which economic sovereignty stands in for other types of sovereignty, keeping conversations of cultural exploitation at bay. The phrase “engaged in exploitation” acknowledges the tendency for Indians to perform the same acts of subtle exploitation as whites. Gambling and the presence of casinos on Indian reservations exemplify how profit-driven enterprises use claims of cultural “tradition” as a selling point. In the poem, “Sonnet, with Slot Machines,” Alexie illustrates how the practice of gambling blends Indian and capitalist traditions via the casino industry. The sonnet’s first two lines read:

1. Gambling is traditional. 2. So is the sacrificial murder of mammals, but who is going to start that up again?”¹⁰

Here, the metaphor between gambling and “tradition” invokes a close relationship via what Homi Bhabha would identify as linguistic “slippage” in the conceptions of gambling as it relates to Indian culture. According to Bhabha’s notion of mimicry, because the colonized person can merely imitate and not fully become, the difference in how one learns the colonizing discourse creates “slippage,” or an ambivalence in meaning between the colonized and colonizer. This applies to Alexie’s intentionally ambiguous metaphor. “Traditional” is something that has long been established as part of a culture. By using this word, Alexie identifies “gambling” as being part of Indian history; however, it is unclear whether he is referring to modern-day casinos, pre-contact gambling activities, or both. This ambiguity creates linguistic slippage, suggesting that tradition can be manipulated and defined differently between historical contexts.

Distinguishing between gambling and gambling *in casinos* draws attention to how Indian “tradition” becomes conflated with capitalist-driven institutions. As the sonnet continues, Alexie demonstrates how conflating Indian and capitalist practices leads to exploitation:

6. So what about Indian casinos? 7. It's all about economic sovereignty for indigenous peoples! 8. Well sure, but can't a slot machine ritually murder a gambler's soul? 9. The Indian woman, defending her tribe's casino, says "The average patron only gambles \$42 dollars a night."¹¹

The use of a question in line 6 suggests that this is the poem’s first allusion to “casinos,” implying that the initial ambiguous mention of “gambling” in the first line refers to pre-contact, pre-casino wagering. When Alexie links “economic sovereignty,” the power to be financially independent as a nation, with “casinos,” he implies that the latter represents a beneficial and constructive step toward Indian independence. However, line 8 examines the effect of

9 Nelson, “Humor is my Green Card,” 41.

10 Sherman Alexie, “Sonnet, with Slot Machines,” *What I’ve Stolen, What I’ve Earned*, (Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 2014), 32.

11 Alexie, “Sonnet, with Slot Machines,” 32.

such “economic sovereignty” on the individual. By invoking “a gambler’s soul,” the sonnet reminds the reader that a gambler has value beyond economics. “Murder” pits economic-based sovereignty against innate human value. Further, the use of “murder” takes on the dominant discourse by acknowledging how capitalist practices are beneficial to the institution yet destructive to the individual.

The shift in focus from the general “gambler” to a specific “Indian woman” between the eighth and ninth sections illustrates how economic sovereignty via the profits of casinos operates on Indian exploitation. Between lines 8 and 9, Alexie does not employ a formal break, where the conventional Petrarchan stanza would have a *volte* to clearly demarcate a shift from the conflict raised in the initial octave to the resolution of the sestet. Instead, a shift to a more specific character creates a transition from abstract to tangible, meant to highlight how group politics rationalize individual loss. His use of the word “defending” invokes protection against an accusatory claim; it identifies the Indian woman as investing in the benefits of “economic sovereignty” created by Indian casinos. “Only” further solidifies the woman’s position, reinforcing her denial of exploitation in casinos: although the gambler loses money, her logic deems those losses small and insignificant. This justification invokes denial of institutional exploitation. While formally the *volte* is unclear, the resolving quality of the conventional sestet is carried out, as the sonnet moves away from the initial ambiguity of “gambling” to one clearly rooted in American capitalism.

The poem’s conclusion makes explicit the emotional cost of understanding sovereignty solely in terms of economic profit. In response to the Indian woman’s aforementioned justification for gambling, Alexie writes in the penultimate line:

13. Wait, here it is, make the “b” silent, and pronounce it “nummer,” as in “remove sensation, especially as a result of cold or anesthesia, as in “remove emotion.”¹²

By using “nummer,” a word nearly identical in spelling and pronunciation to “number,” Alexie equates casinos to drug-like agents that foster desensitization to harmful practices. Thus, the use of “only” in line 9, reveals an underlying assumption of authority able to determine how significant a gambler’s losses are. The poem’s final line allegorically illustrates how repeated instances of exploitation create long term desensitization and complicity:

14. If you punch a kid once, then he’ll cry. If you punch a kid once an hour for a year, then he’ll learn how to make the fists feel like flowers.¹³

Alexie uses “kid” in this analogy to invoke the long-term socialization that fosters desensitization to pain. In doing so, Alexie describes how lack of perception to casinos as exploitative enterprises exemplifies a numbness to the collective trauma brought on by colonial capitalism. This resolution further clarifies the initial ambiguity of “gambling” as the ambiguity itself can be interpreted as a result of having been numbed to the nuances of exploitation of Indian people and culture.

12 Ibid, 32.

13 Ibid, 32.

“How Indian Are You?": The Disidentification of Indian Identity

In an interview with Ase Nygren, Alexie responds to a question about the effect of collective trauma on Indian identity by stating, “The whole idea of authenticity — ‘How Indian are you’ — is the most direct result of the fact that we don’t know what an American Indian identity is. There is no measure anymore.”¹⁴ Alexie invokes the numerical rhetoric of a fixed standard, a “measure,” of Indianness, to indicate the nonexistence of a contemporary, fixed Indian identity. Alexie’s explorations into the nuance of contemporary American Indian identity align with what author José Esteban Muñoz acknowledges as “disidentification”: a process of self-actualization that denies conceptualization of identification as a “restrictive or ‘masterfully’ fixed mode” (Muñoz 28). The application of “disidentification” to these sonnets is useful in understanding how Alexie’s deconstruction of the fixed colonial form creates space for complicated Indian selves that don’t align with a singular fixed notion of normalized Indian identity.

The narrative voice of Alexie’s “Sonnet, with Vengeance,” is an indigenous poet and filmmaker ruminating on the potential for self-determination within the context of the white-dominated film industry. In the ninth line of the poem, the content shifts from detailing limitations of the white film industry to personal aspirations and project goals:

*8. I rarely write screenplays about Indians. I have written screenplays about superheroes, smoke jumpers, pediatric surgeons, all-girl football teams, and gay soldiers. 9. I often dream of writing a B-movie about an Indian vigilante. 10. No, not a vigilante. That would be too logical. (53)*¹⁵

Similar to the example of “Sonnet, with Slot Machines,” the shift in focus to a particular subject between lines 8 and 9 acts as a disguised volte. Here, the shift aims to explore the relationship between individual and institution; however, unlike the Indian woman in the previous poem, this narrator seems fully aware of his dependency on the industry. He reflects on his maneuverability within it and questions to what degree he has reciprocal influence back upon the institution. The act of “writing” invokes the transfer of individual thought into public engagement; it offers the potential to change cultural surroundings. This engagement with the public sphere invokes Muñoz’s claims regarding the process of identity normalization:

the disidentificatory identity performances I catalog in these pages are all emergent identities-in-difference. These identities in-difference emerge from a failed interpolation within the dominant public sphere. Their emergence is predicated on their ability to disidentify with the mass public and instead, through this disidentification, contribute to the function of a counter public sphere. (7)

14 Nancy J. Peterson, “The Poetics of Tribalism in Sherman Alexie’s *The Summer of Black Widows*,” *Sherman Alexie: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2010), 147.

15 Sherman Alexie, “Sonnet, with Vengeance,” *What I’ve Stolen, What I’ve Earned* (Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 2014), 53.

The notion of “failed interpolation” reveals an alternate effect of the disguised volte. The content shifts from a description of presumably successful screenplays to the low-quality, lowly ranked “B-movie.” This ranking suggests that movies about “superheroes, smoke jumpers, pediatric surgeons, all-girl football teams, and gay soldiers” would draw more success than one about an Indian vigilante. These financial rankings in tandem with the listing of specific identities illustrate degrees of acceptability within the “dominant public sphere.” The filmmakers’ follow-up description of the Indian vigilante as being “too logical” invokes the character as taking on an identity that makes sense to spectators; even when hinging on stereotype, a movie with an Indian protagonist is deemed second-tier. The choice to disidentify the Indian protagonist from normalized conceptions of Indianness demonstrates how complicating Indian identity further removes it from the realm of publicly accepted identities. The narrator’s desire to employ a realistic, complex Indian protagonist relates to Alexie’s statement in the second epigraph of this paper: “*Maybe Native American geeks will hack-blackmail Hollywood into portraying us as complex residents of the 21st Century.*” The use of “maybe” functions similarly to how “dream” works in the poem, as both invoke hopeful desire that presents the difficulty of complicating the simplified, stereotypical notions of Indian identity engrained into a public sphere rooted in tradition and the rhetoric of authenticity.

“Insinuation” via the Interrupted Monosonnet

Homi Bhabha’s description of the relationship between minority discourse and master discourse is useful in terms of thinking of how Alexie strategically infiltrates a colonial form to disrupt its ideological stability:

Minority discourse does not simply confront the pedagogical, or powerful master discourse with a contradictory or negating referent. It interrogates its object by initially withholding its objective. Insinuating itself into the terms of reference of the dominant discourse, the supplementary antagonizes the implicit power to generalize, to produce the sociological solidity.¹⁶

The use of “insinuating” invokes the ability of minority discourse to subtly manipulate itself inside the dominant ideology where it can effectively implement its subversive objective; an objective that is initially “withheld” to avoid dismissal. Once inside the “terms of reference of the dominant discourse,” proper “interrogation,” or effective critique, can occur where when minority literature can deconstruct the solidified whole of dominant ideology and social structure. In the what Alexie coins the “monosonnet” form, he inserts parenthesized prose paragraphs in between the octave and sestet, resembling the aforementioned process of insinuation. These paragraphs situate an indigenous perspective into the initial context of the white, “master discourse,” making the poem a culturally blended form that identifies an alternate, perspective on colonialism by the poem’s conclusion.

Alexie establishes “Monosonnet for Colonialism, Interrupted,” with a context of institutionalized white violence against Indians. The first octave attests to the decimation of native people via American colonialism:

16 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 155.

Yes,
Colonialism
Created
George
Custer
And
Andrew
Jackson¹⁷

Custer and Jackson represent the institutionalized practice of separating Indians and whites via mass killing and displacement. "Created" acts as the bridge between institution and individual, demonstrating how an individual carries out the desired ends of the institutional apparatus; here, it invokes the process of perpetuating institutionalized colonial practices. By placing "colonialism" in the subject position, Alexie emphasizes its ability to shape individual thought and action. He then inserts a prose paragraph between the octave and sestet that acts as the formal disruption and adaptation of the conventional fourteen-line sonnet to acknowledge a more complex, overlooked understanding of postcolonial syncretism.

(who were genocidal maniacs, but without American colonialism we would not have action-adventure movies like Die Hard or the consolations and desolations of Emily Dickinson. I am a man who loves cinematic gunfire and American poetry, if not equally, then with parallel passion. In fact, at one point, I considered writing an action-adventure movie about Emily Dickinson. Now, tell me, who wouldn't want to see that flick? Of course, such a film would never be made, but can you appreciate the basic principle of the cultural mash-up? Can you appreciate this improvisational and highly American olio of poetry, film, and comedy?)¹⁸

The notion of "basic principle" recognizes "cultural mash-up" as an easy concept to understand. However, the conclusion that "this film will never be made" acknowledges its misalignment with accepted American visions of multiculturalism. The repetition of "can you appreciate" challenges the ideal of a melting pot culture by asking readers whether or not they embrace culturally-blended art forms. Essentially, Alexie breaks the fourth wall to interrogate readers about their own reactions to this very sonnet. The sonnet embodies "improvisation" as it reacts to established notions of acceptance and pushes to reconstruct more complicated consumers. In their improvisational capabilities, both the hypothetical film and the poem stake claims to being part of the "highly American olio of poetry, film and comedy," while simultaneously hinting that they are unacceptable or beyond the "basic" American notion of multiculturalism. Parentheses around the paragraph further emphasizes the stanza as implicitly existing within, or between the octave and sestet, that without the paragraph, would that present a much more dichotomized of approaching the postcolonial subject.

17 Sherman Alexie, "Monosonnet for Colonialism, Interrupted," *What I've Stolen, What I've Earned* (Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 2014), 42.

18 Alexie, "Monosonnet for Colonialism, Interrupted," 42.

Before analyzing the transition, it is useful to revisit how Bhabha conceptualizes a particular effect of mimicry. In describing how the colonized learns the way of the colonizer, Bhabha discloses the potential for an alternate, new knowledge:

"The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing. For in 'normalizing' the colonial state or subject, the dream of post-enlightenment civility alienates its own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms." (123)

Because the colonized people can only imitate without ever being able to become the colonizer themselves, a new knowledge of the master discourse emerges from the colonized people. The concluding sestet of "Sonnet, for Colonialism" employs a figurehead that doesn't embody the imitation of mimicry, but does conceptualize an "alternate knowledge" that carries its own agency far beyond a limited "knowledge of the [colonial state's] norms."

The final sestet epitomizes the potential for a new knowledge, developed by the colonized voice. Alexie counters the initial figures representing institutionalized whiteness with the invocation of American trumpeter Miles Davis, who revolutionized the genre of jazz music several times throughout his career. The concluding sestet reaches an awareness of the potential beauty in art emerging from colonized subject positions:

*But
Colonialism
Also
Created
Miles
Davis.¹⁹*

The use of "but" contrasts to the first word of the initial octave, "yes," enacting a transition in how the poem explores colonialism. As a conjunction, "but" bridges the opening and closing stanzas as if to acknowledge the inability for the colonized subject to detach from an institutionalized reality. However, Miles Davis, a revolutionary American musician (and adamant critic of white power), invokes a focus on future, new art forms able to break down dichotomies of culture and genre. The use of "created" acknowledges Davis as a product of colonial structures; however, Davis's awareness of institutionalized racial dynamics as well as utilization of his restrictions fostered his ability to reconstruct the genre of jazz as well as broader musical spheres. He exemplifies an artist's ability to shape the surrounding cultural context, via the process of learning and implementing personal perspective within it.

The transition through all three stanzas of the poem reflect an intentional insinuation by Alexie who pushes on the concept of a new postcolonial knowledge that is able to itself become a complicated, impactful ideology. Miles Davis became part of the American musical canon, and while African-Americans and American Indians have very different relationships to US colonialism, the example of Davis seems to offer potential for the modern day Indian artists to

19 Ibid, 42.

permeate white disciplines and insinuate self-defined identity into general awareness. Embrace of complex postcolonial dynamics fosters potential for cultural transformation.

Breaking Tradition: Poetry as a Means for Self-Determination

The three poems analyzed in this paper illustrate how Sherman Alexie manipulates the colonial sonnet form in his latest collection to engage the difficulty of actualizing a complicated American Indian identity into general public awareness. His ability to make the sonnet his own through the use of numbered sections and interjecting prose paragraphs allows him to insinuate an indigenous perspective within the colonial form to challenge common liberal notions of American multiculturalism that fail to account for, let alone embrace the syncretic identities of complex colonial history. He underscores the existence and limitations of Indian self-determination within the broader context of capitalism as he explores the necessity of understanding the contemporary Indian identity as one having emerged out of assimilation into whiteness. Alexie exposes how fixation on the rhetoric of “tradition” and “authenticity” reinforces exploitation and oversimplified conceptions of American Indian sovereignty. By recognizing the potential for beauty in genres that defy accepted norms, Alexie pushes for a culture more open to change. While the potential for revising public conception of the modern-day Indian is difficult, it is a challenge that Alexie takes on in order to deconstruct deluded notions of authenticity in the minds of the both the colonized and the colonizer. The intentional choice to disidentify with fixed notions of Indianness helps Alexie push to create space for self-determination via literature.

References

- Alexie, Sherman. *A Summer of Black Widows*. Brooklyn, Hanging Loose Press, 1996. Print.
- Alexie, Sherman. "Monosonnet for Colonialism, Interrupted." *What I've Stolen, What I've Earned*. Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 2014. 42. Print.
- Alexie, Sherman. "Maybe Native American geeks will hack-blackmail Hollywood into portraying us as complex residents of the 21st Century." 18 December. 2014. Tweet.
- Alexie, Sherman. "Sonnet, with Slot Machines." *What I've Stolen, What I've Earned*. Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 2014. 32. Print.
- Alexie, Sherman. "Sonnet, with Vengeance." *What I've Stolen, What I've Earned*. Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 2014. 53. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print
- Etter, Carrie. "Dialectic to Dialogic: Negotiating Bicultural Heritage in Sherman Alexie's Sonnets." 2001. Reprint. *Critical Insights: Sherman Alexie*. Ed. Leon Lewis. Hackensack: Salem Press, 2012. 161-168. *Literary Reference Center*. Web. 24 November 2014.
- Himmelsbach, Erik. "The Reluctant Spokesman." *Conversations with Sherman Alexie*. Ed. Nancy J. Peterson. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press 2009. 32-35. Print.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Print.
- Nelson, Joshua B. "'Humor is my Green Card': A Conversation with Sherman Alexie." *World Literature Today* 84.4 (March 2010): 39-43. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. November 24 2014.
- Nygren, Ase. "A World of Story-Smoke: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie." *Conversations with Sherman Alexie*. Ed. Nancy J. Peterson. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press 2009. 141-156. Print.
- Peterson, Nancy J. "The Poetics of Tribalism in Sherman Alexie's *The Summer of Black Widows*." *Sherman Alexie: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Eds. Jeff Berglund and Jan Roush. Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2010. 134-158. Print.
- Womack, Craig S. *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Print.

Critical Theory & Social Justice Journal

of undergraduate research

- FOUCAULT -

